

The University of Chicago

THE RISE OF
CHURCH CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG
EARLY CHRISTIANS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1937

By
SAMUEL MacLEAN GILMOUR

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CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: THE RISE OF CHURCH CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG EARLY CHRISTIANS

This study began with several observations: that British and American scholarship, as far as the primitive Church is concerned, has been almost exclusively interested in problems of order and organization; that German scholarship, since the publication of Sohm's Kirchenrecht, has shifted its interest to the "idea" of the primitive Church but has treated it as an exercise in biblical theology or has been concerned with establishing some contemporary concept as ideal and original; and that there has been no consistent or comprehensive effort to understand and delineate the primitive concept of the Church in genetic relation to the social situation within which Christianity took its rise. An attempt has been made in the preceding chapters to trace the rise of Church consciousness from its earliest reflections in gospel pericopes to its conceptual formulation in the Christian literature of the late first and early second centuries. This concluding section undertakes, in the first place, to summarize the process by which Christians became "Church conscious" and, in the second place, to isolate some of the many factors which contributed to the articulation of that consciousness in terms of dogma.

I

The Gospels and their structural units are direct source material only for a study of the Christ of early Christian faith. It is no easy task to get behind the early pericopes to the historical Jesus, but, in so far as historical methodology permits us to do so, it is possible to draw certain inferences. Jesus was a Jew who never contemplated breaking with the ecclesiastical society within which he lived and taught. He accepted the Jewish sacerdotal system as representing a valid aspect of religion. He discarded some elements in the contemporary didactic structure of Judaism, challenged others, and made his own significant contribu-

tion, but contemplated no radical repudiation of it as a whole. He modified, enriched, and vitalized the theocratic ideal of his people but did so along lines consonant with the Jewish prophetic tradition. A critical examination of our source material gives us no warrant for thinking that Jesus intended to found a new community apart from that of a purified nucleus of his own people.

Christianity began as a new Messiah cult within Judaism. The Jerusalem community considered itself the true Israel: the Israel which had identified the expected Son of Man with the risen Christ. It articulated this conviction by the choice of the word *ἐκκλησία* (or its Aramaic equivalent) as a self-designation. Yet, its respect for the temple cultus and its affirmation of the halachic discipline indicate that it was no more than a synagogue within the larger Jewish "Church."

The new faith was soon carried to Jewish centres outside Palestine. The pericope in Matthew 16:17-19 probably took form in an Antiochene community and indicates that adherents of the new cult rapidly achieved a self-consciousness which distinguished them from the Jewish society at large. They were members of an elect community specifically founded by Jesus the Christ. It is clear, however, that the Christian gospel found little acceptance among Jews in either Palestine or the diaspora. The transition of Christianity from a synagogue of unorthodox Jews into a Gentile cult may have been facilitated by developments within dispersion Judaism. At any rate, it took place at a very early time, and it was as a predominantly non-Jewish faith that Christianity developed and articulated a distinct self-consciousness.

Paul's Corinthian correspondence is most informative when interrogated for an understanding of the "Church" consciousness of new converts from paganism. These converts thought of the ecclesia as a cult society comparable to those to which many of them had belonged. Their new religion did not at first necessitate a radical break with their pagan past. Furthermore, they were conscious of few, if any, ecumenical relationships. They were individualists who had associated themselves with a new thiasos.

Paul was only one of many early leaders of the Christian cult in a non-Jewish environment and must not be regarded as normative in any strict sense, but his letters constitute the most important source material for an understanding of a significant and creative period. Paul sought to exert ethical and social

control over the new movement as well as to propagate its faith. He tried to impress upon converts a sense of their separateness. He thought of Christianity against the background of the known world. He rationalized his own break with Judaism by an interpretation of the Church as the true Israel and believed in a mystical unity of all Christians in one community of the Spirit.

Paul, to our knowledge, was the first to employ the figure of the ecclesia as the corpus Christi. The metaphorical content is usually paramount in the passages in which the figure of speech occurs, but in several instances the metaphorical shades over into the mystical: the Church is the actual extension of Christ.

Christianity as a Gentile cult took over that part of the Jewish inheritance which had made Judaism a significant religious factor in the Graeco-Roman world and discarded those features which had proved to be handicaps. It repudiated all racial limitations. It discarded a sacerdotal system which had outlived its usefulness and, as a result, was able to develop its own effective substitute. It took over and enriched those parts of the didactic structure of Judaism which could be effectively employed in a non-Jewish milieu. It appropriated the theocratic ideal but reinterpreted it as the legacy of the ecclesia. The Christian Church was thus equipped with those values which had commended Judaism to non-Jews, without being burdened by those characteristics which had limited its appeal.

II

The Church consciousness of Christians of the second and third generations was gradually defined in terms of dogma. There is no such thing as a static "idea of the Church" in the New Testament and early Christian literature. The concept varies from source to source and even within the same source. Primitive and more advanced formulations were held at the same time by different sections of the Church. However, there are sufficient data to make possible a general sketch of the development of the early Christian idea of the ecclesia.

Even in Mark, the earliest Gospel, Jesus is the founder of the Christian cult as well as the herald of the new age. This becomes an explicit affirmation in Matthew and is elaborately au-

thenticated by the interpretation of history in Luke-Acts. The assumption, in some form or another, underlies all subsequent writings and is particularly evident in the Fourth Gospel. In First Clement it is supplemented by the theory that Christ had also made provision for the regular succession of ecclesiastical leadership.

The conviction of early Christians that they constituted the true people of God was impressively articulated in the literature of this later period--no where more so than in Luke-Acts and First Peter. Perhaps its most radical definition is in Ignatius' Letter to the Magnesians. There it is affirmed that Judaism split off from Christianity rather than Christianity from Judaism. Matthew represents Jesus as distinguishing his followers both from Jews and pagans. The sharp distinction between the Church and "the world" is particularly evident in Revelation, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Gospel of John. The author of Ephesians emphasizes the Pauline doctrine of the divine election of believers and adds the item that they were a building founded upon the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. The "house of God" which Christ had founded, the "flock of God," and the "people of God" are frequent termini in sub-Pauline literature.

The eschatological content of the early Christian idea of the Kingdom of God declined with the growth of the Church and the consolidation of Christianity as a religion indigenous to the Graeco-Roman world. The form of several of the parables in Matthew shows that in its author's day the ideas of the Kingdom and the ecclesia were beginning to coalesce. The former is practically displaced in the Fourth Gospel by the concept of "life"--a present possession of the Church. The Church and the Kingdom are explicitly identified in the Shepherd of Hermas.

Paul's letters had contained numerous paraenetic sections for the guidance and control of Christian behavior, including a Haustafel modelled on Hellenistic prototypes. Similar hortatory interests influenced the formulation of many of the sayings and pericopes which Matthew collected as the basis for a new legalism. They also led, at a later date, to the composition of the Epistle of James, the first part of the Didache, the Mandates of Hermas, and the Pastorals. As the Christian movement approached maturity it became increasingly conscious of a need for a normative didac-

tic basis with which to guarantee its continuance as a divine community.

The growing Church needed also methods of ecclesiastical discipline both for leaders and the led. Some of these were borrowed from Judaism and others were developed to meet the exigencies of the occasion. Their validation in the Christian tradition is an interesting witness to the growth of Church consciousness. Matthew and the author of First Clement appealed to the authority of Jesus to authenticate disciplinary procedure in the Church of their day, while the author of the Pastorals invoked the prestige of the great apostle to the Gentiles. Paul had proposed a very simple test by which to determine whether or not a Christian was "in the Spirit": none but a man in the Holy Spirit could confess that Jesus was Lord. With the growth of the Church as an institution, a more elaborate and perhaps more effective criterion was required. The Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas introduced that of behavior.

The earliest tradition associated Jesus with the institution of the Lord's Supper. This rite was gradually reinterpreted as a sacrificial meal and the elements as sacrifices. This new construction can be noted first in First Clement and then in the Didache. Thus the way was prepared by which the later Catholic Church became a society with sacerdotal guaranties.

Church consciousness had to be defined over against the concept and the reality of the state. An attempt was made, as early as the composition of Mark, to demonstrate that Christianity had never been in any real conflict with Roman officialdom. This apologetic was heightened in Matthew and acutely elaborated in Luke-Acts. The Church was an institution thoroughly compatible with Roman imperialism and worthy of official toleration and even recognition. The Christian literature of conflict, from the later period of Domitian's reign and the early part of the reign of Trajan, summoned its constituency to cult loyalty in anticipation of persecution, or in the actual experience of it, but, with the exception of the book of Revelation, did not abandon hope of achieving a satisfactory modus vivendi with the state.

Speculative interest in the Church took its rise with the apostle Paul. His concept of the Church as the body of Christ was elaborated by the author of Ephesians in the light of gnostic ideology. There is an echo of the same mystical interest in First

Clement and a clear enunciation of it in the letters of Ignatius. The same concept of a union between Christ and the Church is articulated by the author of the Gospel of John in his allegory of the vine and its branches. The allegories in the Shepherd of Hermas develop the speculative interest in the Church in popular, non-intellectual imagery. Paul had pictured the Church by means of the metaphor of a virgin who was betrothed to her Lord and was to be united with him at the parousie. The author of Ephesians reinterpreted this under the influence of the gnostic notion of a heavenly marriage between the Redeemer and the redeemed: the mystery of a spiritual marriage had already been consummated between Christ and the ecclesia.

God's foreordination of Christians had been a tenet of Paul's theology and recurs in most sub-Pauline writings. The idea that membership in the community of the redeemed had been opened to those in "the lower parts of the earth" by the post-passion activities of Christ was first introduced in the Epistle to the Ephesians. This doctrine of a descensus ad infernum was explicitly enunciated in First Peter. In the Shepherd of Hermas, the task of the evangelization of the residents of the underworld was the post-mortem one of the Christian prophets and teachers of the first generations. The idea that just men who had died before the advent of Christ had had their faith brought to fulfillment by him and therefore belong to the Church of God is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Church, for Ignatius, existed from the beginning of time. The Old Testament patriarchs and prophets as well as the Christian believers enter into the unity of God through Christ as the "door." The idea of the eternity of the Church is present in several passages in the Didache. In the Shepherd of Hermas, the Church pre-existed before the world was made as the first of God's creations: that for which the very universe was established.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, probably influenced by categories of Alexandrian philosophy, conceived of a dualism between the Church as a functioning cult and the Church as an ideal entity. There is a similar dualism suggested in the Didache. For the author of Revelation, the Church militant was made up of all who refused to worship the statue of Caesar, while the Church triumphant was the heavenly host of the martyrs and the redeemed in the New Jerusalem. In the Shepherd of Hermas,

the Church on earth was an imperfect, empirical society, distinguished from the perfect, ideal Church that was to be. The Christ of the Gospel of John prayed for the consummation of his union with the Church, when those whom God had given him would be with him where he would be. For Ignatius, the local congregation under the monarchical bishop was a visible symbol of the invisible, catholic ecclesia under God the Father.

III

It is evident from this study of the rise of Church consciousness among early Christians that most of the constituent elements in the early Catholic doctrine of the Church, as it can be delineated, for instance, from Irenaeus' Adversus haereses,¹ had been articulated by the end of the first quarter of the second century. The Church was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Israel. It had been founded by Jesus Christ, who had ordained its government, legislated its discipline, and centralized its authority. It was a universal entity. It was a divine community with distinctive sacerdotal guaranties. It was the body of Christ. Only one significant item of Irenaeus' concept is missing in the literature we have surveyed: the Church as the repository of the truth. There are hints of this idea in the writings which show concern because of early sectaries--Ephesians, the Pastorals, the Johannine literature, and the letters of Ignatius, but its full articulation awaited the definition of orthodoxy as against those interpretations of Christianity favored by Christians more receptive to so-called "gnostic" ideas.

IV

One thesis of Sohm's Kirchenrecht has been accepted by almost every scholar who has written, since its publication, on the "idea" of the primitive Church: the Church consciousness of early Christians was the result of a dogmatic identification of the new community of believers with the Old Testament Israel of God. The idea of the ecclesia was a "religious" idea from the beginning. It dominated all early Christian thinking, and it

¹Cf. Wolfgang Schmidt, Die Kirche bei Irenaeus (Helsingfors, 1934).

would be nonsense, according to Sohm, to speak of its "rise." Sohm's corollary to this thesis, that First Clement marks the point at which the Catholic idea of the Church displaced the primitive one, has been much disputed, but few have challenged his primary assertion.

This study has not been planned as a refutation of Sohm or of other scholars who have followed him. It has been an independent inquiry into the rise of Church consciousness in the light of modern criticism of our source material and modern knowledge of the social and religious background of early Christianity. It has, however, reached certain conclusions which lend themselves to a contrast with Sohm's fundamental proposition. The Church consciousness of early Christians was the gradual result of a complex interplay of many factors. A dogmatic belief of Christians in their identity with the true people of God no doubt played an important part from early times. It may account for the choice of ἐκκλησία as the denomination of the new cult. But its full articulation was the result rather than the occasion of Church consciousness and, by itself, cannot explain the stages in the evolution of the concept of the Church which we have observed. This study ends, at the risk of needless iteration, with an enumeration of some of the many factors which played a role in the rise of Church consciousness and its conceptual formulation:

1. The Hellenization of the new religion when, as a Messiah cult among dispersion Jews, it reinterpreted its tradition in the light of ideas current in contemporary "redemption" cults and broadened its appeal to include non-Jews.

2. The appropriation and reinterpretation of the Jewish eschatological hope, the best of the Jewish didactic tradition, and many cult practices of Judaism.

3. Conflict with Judaism.

4. Competition with other redeemer cults in the Graeco-Roman world.

5. Contact with, and then conflict with, Roman imperialism.

6. The decline of apocalyptic enthusiasm and the confusion of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God with the functioning ecclesia.

7. The reinterpretation of Christianity's history by competent apologists.

8. The appropriation of the Septuagint as Scripture and the gradual fixation of the Christian tradition.

9. Problems of discipline and control in both the membership and leadership of a rapidly expanding constituency, and the formulation of a Christianized paraenesis.

10. The decline of "spiritism" and the increasing prestige of an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

11. Sacerdotal reinterpretation of the cultic meal.

12. Speculative interests stimulated by contact with mystical and quasi-philosophical ideas in Christianity's Hellenistic environment.

13. The accreditation of articulations of Church consciousness by interpretation of the Old Testament and the Christian tradition.

